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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 003466

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SUBJECT: ELECTION UPDATE: CAMPAIGN HEADS INTO THE FINAL STRETCH

REF: A. CARACAS 03426

[1](#)B. CARACAS 03427

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,  
FOR 1.4 (D)

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) With less than two weeks before the presidential election, both President Chavez and opposition candidate Rosales are trying to shore up their bases as well as attract undecided voters. President Chavez has considerable inherent advantages as he continues to inaugurate ambitious public works projects and his campaign continues to engage in voter intimidation. Rosales' telegenic spouse is becoming more politically active and Rosales picked up the support of the minor political party of former presidential candidate-comedian Benjamin Rausseo. Chavez will hold his last major rally in Caracas on November 26. Rosales will hold his last major rally the day before in an affluent western section of Caracas, after the campaign dropped plans to hold this event in the poorer eastern sections of the capital. Domestic and international observers are hastily implementing their plans for their reduced and circumscribed missions. At the same time, government training for poll workers appears to be slow and riddled with problems. The Catholic Church formally called on the National Electoral Council (CNE) and military to remain impartial, provoking a strong reaction from Information and Communication Minister Willian Lara. End Summary.

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CNE Stalling on Domestic Observers  
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[1](#)2. (C) Domestic electoral NGO Ojo Electoral is still waiting to be accredited to observe the December 3 presidential election. In previous elections, Ojo, a respected nonpartisan NGO, has been the only domestic organization accredited by the National Electoral Council (CNE). While Ojo's observation abilities have improved with the past three elections, the opposition believes the NGO softens its criticism to maintain its access to the government. NDI Program Officer Carlos Claramount, who manages NDI's technical assistance to Ojo, told Emboff November 14 that the

NGO plans to field roughly 1,000 observers to cover 400 electoral tables.

¶13. (C) Ojo plans to do a quick count and monitor the audits of voting receipts after the polls close. In addition, Ojo's website states it will observe the opening of a small sample of voting centers and do informal interviews to poll voters' opinions on electoral observation, the ease of the process, confidence in the CNE and use of the fingerprint (digital scanning) machines. Claramount also told Emboff that Ojo will do a dry run November 25 to test their communications and computer systems. Ojo is prepared to observe without CNE credentials, if necessary, according to its website.

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Itinerant Observers  
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¶14. (C) Despite the limited time before the election, international observers are still firming up their plans as well. The Carter Center signed an MOU with the National Electoral Council (CNE) November 20 to bring a small observer delegation that will work with the EU (Ref A). The CNE also announced recently that Mercosur countries will send observers from all member states (except Venezuela). Rosales advisors tell us that, in addition to contracting some of Mexican President Felipe Calderon's campaign advisers and pollsters to assist their campaign, they have invited members of Mexico's National Action Party (PAN) as well as representatives from like-minded parties in neighboring countries to unofficially observe.

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Poll Worker Training Advancing Slowly  
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¶15. (SBU) According to CNE director Vicente Diaz, the CNE has only trained about 8 percent of voters selected at random

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to serve as poll workers. Service for those selected is obligatory, although seldom enforced. Those selected have until November 30 to be trained and credentialed. Meanwhile, Sumate held a press conference November 17 to denounce reports it had received of irregularities in the CNE training and certification. To fill this gap, Sumate Vice President Maria Corina Machado announced the NGO will offer additional training to poll workers that are interested. She specified that Sumate's information is designed to complement, not substitute, the CNE's mandatory training.

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Church Calls for Impartiality and Conscious Voting  
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¶16. (C) The Venezuelan Episcopal Conference (CEV) released a statement November 16 calling on the CNE and military to carry out their electoral duties with "absolute impartiality" to help "dissipate distrust" in the electoral system. In an oblique reference to PDVSA President Rafael Ramirez' pressuring of PDVSA employees to support Chavez' re-election campaign, the CEV also criticized attempts to coerce government employees and encouraged voters to vote according to Christian precepts, which include "protection of citizens from the abuses of unchecked capitalism as well as from the complete domination of the State based on totalitarian ideology." Ruling MVR party leader and Minister of Information and Communication Willian Lara responded to the statement by insisting that the CNE and military are autonomous. He also accused the media of trying to link the CEV's comments to the much stronger denunciations of retired Venezuelan Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara (Ref B).

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Voter Intimidation  
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17. (SBU) More incidents of voter intimidation have also surfaced recently. Caracas daily "El Universal" reported that civil servants in Bolivar state are being forced to participate in a Chavez campaign fundraiser. Each worker is assigned a number of raffle tickets they have to buy, at a cost of 5,000 bolivars (USD 2.30) each, based on their position. "El Universal" also reported that Tachira State government workers were forced to attend a Chavez campaign rally. Also, Bolivarian university students in another state were temporarily suspended for not attending a similar rally, according to an Embassy contact.

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It takes a Family to Govern  
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18. (SBU) Opposition candidate Manuel Rosales' wife, Eveling Trejo de Rosales, has taken on a more prominent role in his campaign in recent days, giving several television and newspaper interviews. Taking swipes at Chavez' current divorced status, Mrs. Rosales said only a married president can set an example for the national reconciliation and reconstruction of strong families needed to improve the political climate and reduce poverty in Venezuela. Mrs. Rosales, a former law student, is the Zulia Governor's fourth wife and together they have 10 children. During a November 21 ceremony to distribute scholarships, Chavez dismissed the criticism as proof of the opposition's desperation and declared that all Venezuelans were part of his "family."

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Gravy Train Gets Watered Down  
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19. (U) Chavez has launched a number of new missions and "inaugurated" several new public works projects in the last week, many before they are actually finished. Just a few examples:

-- In opposition-run Nueva Esparta, Chavez, accompanied by Energy and Petroleum Minister Rafael Ramirez, on November 17 initiated "Mision Revolucion Energetica" to promote energy conservation. Between now and the end of the year, the mission plans to install 17 million new, energy-saving light bulbs throughout the country.

-- In Carabobo State, Chavez inaugurated the first line of the Valencia metro November 18. News reports, however,

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indicate that the metro is only running two incomplete trains on a limited schedule and lacks air conditioning. Only three of the metro's seven stations have been built.

-- In Zulia November 19, Chavez inaugurated a dam serving the state's four most populated counties, opened a new housing complex, and laid the first rail of a new railway across the Maracaibo Lake bridge.

-- Via satellite, Chavez oversaw on November 21 the laying of a cornerstone for Line 5 of the Caracas metro, which will connect some of the more middle class areas of Caracas, such as Bello Monte, Tamanaco, and Parque del Este, with Line 2 in Chuao. Chavez claimed that time constraints prevented him from not attending the event in person, but said the project was proof that he "loved" the middle class, contrary to his opponents' claims.

-- The same day Chavez also launched "Mision Alma Mater" aimed at creating 50 new universities and increasing university attendance by 100,000 by 2008. Chavez had previously announced he would launch this mission after the election.

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"Rolling Stone"

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¶10. (SBU) Former minor presidential candidate and comedian Benjamin Rausseo's ("El Conde de Huacharo") party Piedra (stone, in English) formally announced its support for Rosales November 21. Piedra Secretary General Leonardo Chirinos officially notified the CNE of the party's change in candidate, as well. The announcement had been expected as Rausseo's advisors had privately pressed him to cede to Rosales for some time. Chirinos said Piedra hoped the election would be a springboard for the party's future consolidation. Rausseo's advisors previously told PolCouns that they hoped such an announcement would give Rosales a boost, but they did not expect Piedra could deliver many votes that would otherwise go to Chavez.

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Campaign Round Up

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¶11. (SBU) The Rosales and Chavez campaigns announced their last major campaign rallies on November 25 and 26, respectively, the last weekend before the end of the campaign season. While both candidates will hold their marches in Caracas, Rosales had originally planned to hold his rally on the Francisco Fajardo Highway in eastern Caracas, but has since moved it to the western part of the road near the opposition-ruled Chacao and Baruta municipalities. March organizers blamed the change on lack of response from the Chavista mayor of Libertador municipality, but we understand that Rosales supporters' reluctance to travel to the poorer, pro-Chavez section of town was also an important factor in the decision.

WHITAKER